

# Communicating Effectively with Children

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## Why take the time to communicate?

Children base their views of themselves and the world on their daily experiences. One of the most important experiences adults can provide for children is to talk with and listen to them. Through these daily interactions, children and adults can develop relationships that help children to learn about themselves and the world. Adults who care for children have a responsibility to create and maintain positive and healthy relationships with them. One of the most practical and mutually rewarding ways to achieve this goal is through positive communication.

Research suggests that the

best parent-child relationships are characterized by lots of positive communication and interaction. Content parents and children communicate on a regular basis about many different things. They don't communicate only when there is a conflict. The researchers believe that when adults stay in touch with children through attention and conversation, children may be less likely to act out or behave in ways that create conflict or require discipline.

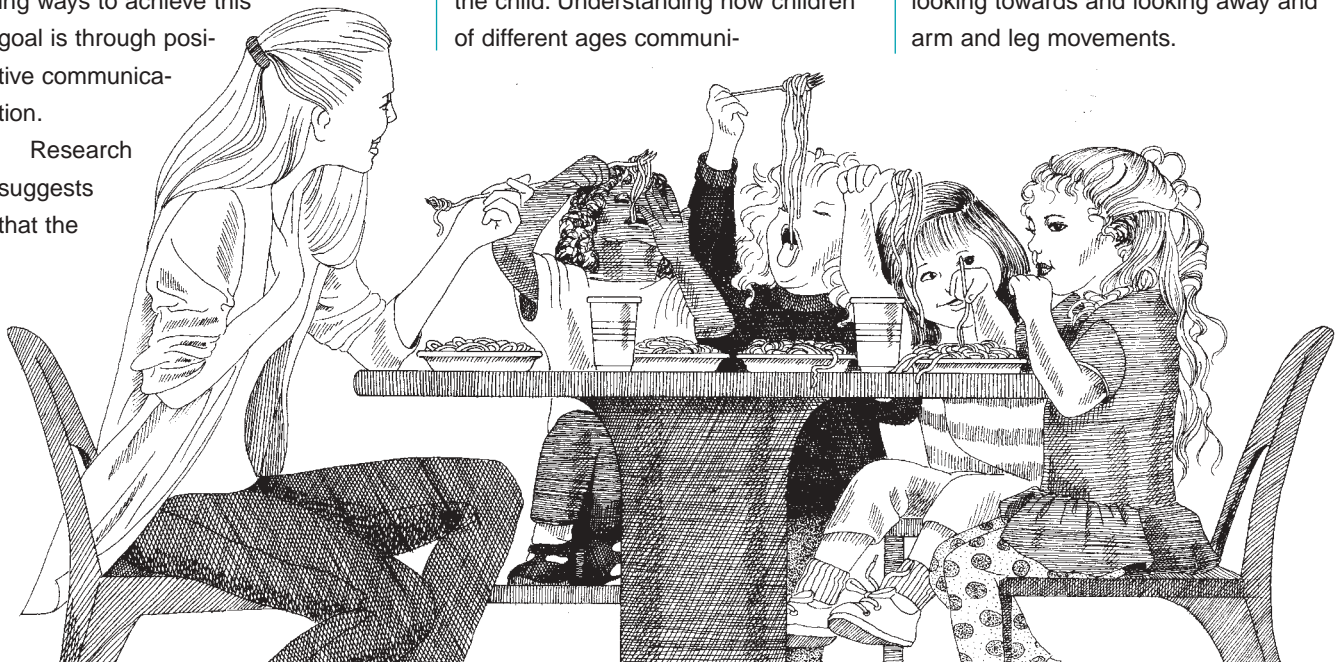
Effective communication with children requires communication styles and behavior appropriate to the age of the child. Understanding how children of different ages communi-

cate and what they like to talk about is crucial for rewarding interaction with them. Adults must communicate in a way that relates to the age and interests of the child.

## Communicating with children of different ages

### Infants: Birth to 12 months

Infants communicate with their coos, gurgles, and grunts, facial expressions, cries, body movements like cuddling or back arching, eye movements such as looking towards and looking away and arm and leg movements.



## Encourage infant communication

- Quickly respond to infant communication (e.g., comfort a crying baby; smile at a smiling infant; relax if a baby turns her head to the side)
- Provide meaning to infants' communicative efforts (e.g., "You are crying, I know it is time for your bottle;" "You are smiling, you like it when I tickle your feet!")
- Use a sing-song, high-pitched tone of voice, exaggerated facial expressions and wide-opened eyes when interacting with young infants. These types of behavior capture infants' attention and help them to keep focused on interacting.
- Make the most of the times when you and an infant are facing each other (e.g., during diaper changes, feedings, mealtimes) and talk, sing or gently tickle the infant. Infants are fascinated by adult faces and love to look at them when they are close.
- Pay attention to an infant's style of expressing emotions, preferred level of activity and tendency to be social. Some infants are quiet and observant and prefer infrequent adult interaction. Other infants are emotional, active and seek continuous adult attention and interaction. Recognizing the unique personality of each infant will make effective communication easier.

## Toddlers: 12 to 36 months

Toddlers communicate with a combination of gestures and grunts, one word sentences, two word sentences, positive and negative emotional expressions and body movements.

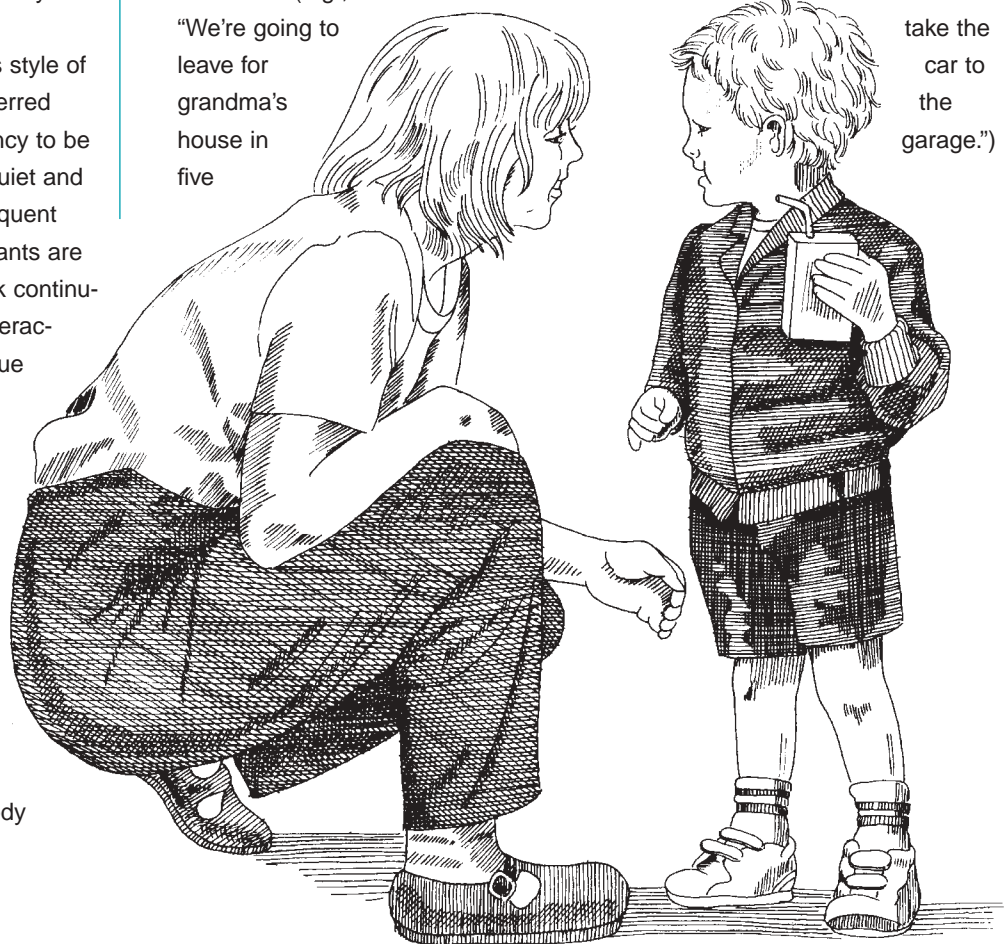
## Encourage toddler communication

- Respond quickly and predictably to toddlers' communicative efforts (e.g., "You are pointing at the fridge, is it time for some juice?" "Bah-bah, that means you want your blanket, doesn't it?")
- Expand on toddlers' one and two word communications and build sentences around their words (e.g., "Hot, that's right, the pizza is hot." "Blue, your pants are blue with white stripes, aren't they?" "Do again? Okay, I'll push you some more on the swing.")
- Keep a word diary where you record toddlers' new words. The diary can be shared with other adults and the words can be used in conversation.
- Give toddlers one direction at a time and provide warnings before transitions (e.g., "We're going to leave for grandma's house in five

minutes." Five minutes pass. "Okay, time to get ready, go get your coat from the bedroom." "Oh good, you got your coat, I'll help you put it on.")

- Label toddlers' emotions (e.g., "When you fall and get hurt, you feel sad." "Playing with your cousin Mary makes you happy!")
- Make the most of daily routines and talk toddlers through routines in the sequence in which they happen (e.g., "First we put warm water in the bathtub...then you take off your clothes and get in! Time to get the washrag soapy and clean you up...first I'll wash your little toes...")
- During play with toddlers, follow their lead and let them create the play. Describe for toddlers what they are doing during play and let them have control (e.g., "Oh, you are driving the car up the sofa, now it is falling to the floor! Here comes

the truck to take the car to the garage.")



- When telling older toddlers what you want, provide an explanation and tell the toddler WHY you want something to happen (e.g., “Janey, I told you to please pick up your blocks and put them away. I don’t want anyone tripping and falling over them.”)

## Preschoolers: 3 to 6 years

Preschoolers begin to talk in full sentences that are grammatically correct.

Young preschoolers may struggle with telling stories in the correct order, but by age 6, sequencing the events of a story comes much more easily.

Preschoolers like to talk about their past experiences.

They experiment with pretend and fantasy play; sometimes preschoolers talk about imaginary experiences.

Children of this age begin to recognize the connection between the spoken word and the written word. They often recognize traffic signs (e.g., stop

and restaurant signs (e.g., McDonald’s) without being told what they literally say.

Preschoolers often talk to themselves when playing and working on tasks such as puzzles or art activities.

### Encourage preschoolers’ communication

- Ask preschoolers questions about past events; probe for details and provide new words to enhance description of experiences (e.g., “Tell me who you played with at child care today? What did you do together?”)
- Encourage preschoolers to talk about their feelings, both positive and negative, and discuss the possible causes for the emotions.
- Create opportunities for preschoolers to engage in fantasy and pretend play, either alone or with friends (e.g., pretend baby bathing, pretend housekeeping, pretend astronaut play)

- Provide opportunities for preschoolers to experience the connection between the spoken word and the written word (e.g., label familiar parts of the physical environment; have children tell you stories and write them down; allow children to ‘write’ their own stories or thank you notes; have children collect items from the environment which include words that they can read, such as toothpaste tubes or cereal boxes)
- When preschoolers are talking to themselves, let them be. Self-talk helps preschoolers focus on what they are doing.

## School-age: 6 to 12 years

School-age children talk much like adults — in full sentences. They ask more questions, can relate past experiences in vivid detail and seek more information and justification for the way things are.

They can understand and talk about the perspective of another person and are beginning to recognize the influence their behavior can have on others.

School-age children can handle more pieces of information at the same time and with assistance from adults can effectively engage in goal setting and problem solving.

At this age, children spend more time talking and playing with peers and friends.

### Encourage school-age communication

- Use conversation as a way to keep up with school-age children’s activities, likes, dislikes and peer relationships. Peers are important at this stage and by talking with children regularly, adults can keep informed about school-age children’s relationships with their agemates.

*(continued on page 5)*

## Encourage family stories

*All children love to hear and to tell stories. Adults can encourage children and parents to share their family stories. Storytelling is a universal way for families to pass down important history from generation to generation. From hearing family stories, children learn about their family identity and about the beliefs and expectations that make their family unique. These experiences encourage children to use their imagination and create visual images of relatives from long ago and far away. Storytelling also brings adults and children closer and creates a wonderful opportunity for intimacy and relationship building. Ask the children and families that you care about to share with you some of their stories.*

*(Taken from: Stone, E. 1988. Black sheep and kissing cousins: How our family stories shape us. NY: Penguin Books.)*

## Be an emotion coach

It is important to help children understand their feelings. In doing so, adults can develop an emotional closeness with children that is important for establishing and maintaining mutual respect. Effective emotion coaching helps children to understand the emotional ups and downs of life. Research finds that children who grow up in families that spend time talking about emotions are more academically successful, have better friendships, fewer infectious diseases and can handle difficult social situations, such as getting teased, more effectively than children whose families do not talk about feelings (Gottman and DeClaire, 1997).

How can adults help children to better understand their emotions? Here are some ideas:

- Be a sharp observer of children's emotions.
- Recognize that children's emotional expressions provide an opportunity to get close. Make the most of these teachable moments.
- Empathetically listen and respond to children's emotions; tell them that you understand their feelings.
- Help children to verbally label their different emotions.
- Set limits while helping children problem solve the emotional experience.

### Example:

When you pick up your 8-year-old daughter from after-school care, she has a bright smile on her face...what can you say and do?

**Parent:** Honey, you have a huge smile on your face! Tell me why.

**Child:** Today when we were jumping rope, I did the whole thing without messing up!

**Parent:** You must feel so happy and proud of yourself! I know how much you like to jump rope and how hard you work at it.

**Child:** Yeah, and today I tried extra hard to do it without messing up and it worked!

**Parent:** That's great, sweetheart...

### Example:

Your 7-year-old son comes home from playing next door and looks sullen and glum. In fact, when he gets in the door, he throws his coat on the floor without hanging it up. What can you say and do?

**Parent:** Nate, what's going on? You always remember to hang up your coat. Did something happen at Stuart's?

**Child:** I hate him! I'm not playing over there anymore.

**Parent:** You sound really angry. What happened?

**Child:** Stuart never lets me play with his new train.

**Parent:** Why do you think that is?

**Child:** I don't know...he says I'll break it.

**Parent:** Well, I can understand why you are mad, but you know Stuart just got the train for his birthday last month. He's probably scared to let anybody else use it. What do you think you can do to let him know you'll be careful with it?

**Child:** I don't know...

**Parent:** Well, instead of getting angry, maybe you could tell him that you understand why he is being careful and ask him to show you exactly what he wants you to do. Let him know that you'll be careful. If he says no, you might just have to wait longer, but at least you tried.

**Child:** Yeah, I know.



(continued from page 3)

- Use conversation to help school-age children set goals and solve problems (“If you have to go to Girl Scouts this afternoon, let’s talk about when you can do your homework.”). Take the time to discuss strategies and solutions and have the school-age child talk about possible outcomes.
- When correcting the school age child’s behavior, provide a calm explanation for your preferences. By giving a reason, you help the school-age child understand the implications of his or her behavior for others (e.g., if your child teases another child because he or she wears glasses, explain that wearing glasses helps the child to see better and remind the child that teasing can hurt another’s feelings).
- Encourage school-age children to talk about their feelings and the possible reasons for their emotions.
- Use conversation to help school-age children learn conflict management skills. Because peer relationships are becoming more important at this age, conflicts between children will likely arise. Help children learn how to manage conflicts effectively while preserving the peer relationship. Act out pretend peer interactions with children and show how conflicts can be resolved, depending on how children handle the situation.

## Adolescents: 12 to 18 years

Adolescents are interested in talking in depth about themselves and about their relationships with others. They want to understand who they are becoming and what others think and feel about them.

Adolescents want to talk about how they are different from their parents and the rest of the world. They are begin-

## The power of the written word

*Sometimes we get so busy with everyday life that we forget the simpler ways to communicate. In “Put Your Heart on Paper” (1995), Henriette Klauser encourages us to use the written word as a way of staying in touch. She says that writing can start communications that may be too difficult for the spoken word and can heal conflicts between adults and children. Most important is that these writings become part of the relationship’s history.*

*Here are some ideas for how to use the written word in your relationships:*

- ✓ *On a small piece of paper, state a simple request such as “I’d like to take a walk with you,” and leave the note in a visible place.*
- ✓ *If you are having trouble understanding a child, or making yourself understood, use writing as an opportunity for explanations.*
- ✓ *Journals can be used to document a relationship’s history. Use the journal to record special events and time spent together.*
- ✓ *Leave small greetings for each other in unlikely places such as on the bathroom mirror or in a backpack.*
- ✓ *Share a journal with someone. Keep the journal in a place where each person can easily get to it and record feelings and experiences.*

ning to recognize that their parents are imperfect people.

Adolescence is a time when children typically act more negative and have more conflicts with their parents.

Adolescents spend more time alone and with their friends and less time with their families.

### Encourage adolescent communication

- Be actively sensitive and respon-

sive to the adolescent experience. Remember, each adolescent is going through major social and physical changes; practice putting yourself in the adolescent’s place when you find yourself disagreeing or growing impatient.

- Use conversation as an opportunity to keep up with adolescent activities and relationships. Stay interested in the adolescent and gently ask questions and seek explanations for

adolescent behavior.

- Although adolescents strive for independence and separation from the family, you can best maintain the relationship by providing a balance between expecting personal responsibility from the adolescent and offering consistent support.
- Be flexible. Seek to understand the adolescent perspective first before trying to be understood yourself. Maintaining the adult-child relationship is perhaps the most helpful thing that one can do for supporting the adolescent through these years.
- Recognize that the adolescent is developing ideas that may be different from your own. Unless these ideas place the adolescent in danger of harm to self or others, accept the adolescent's beliefs as an example of their developing individuality.

## **Make the most of a priceless good: COMMUNICATION**

Few activities in life come with so great a reward as communicating effectively with one another. The ideas in this guide can help you develop healthy and mutually rewarding adult-child relationships. There is little doubt that the world can be overwhelming for children. By paying attention to and communicating regularly with children, you can help children create a view of themselves and the world that is positive and healthy.

## **Resources**

- Bates, E., B. O'Connell and C. Shore. 1987. Language and communication in infancy. In *Handbook of Infant Development*. ed. J. D. Osofsky. NY: Wiley.
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